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Being with Oneself / Being with You: Friendship and Art Criticism

Es ergo sum: C/M – Chopin and Montaigne

On Wednesday, 22 September 1830, Frédéric Chopin wrote from Warsaw to his friend Tytus Woyciechowski:

> […] if not for the fact that you are far away, somewhere past Hrubieszów, I would have asked you to come […] and bring solace to your fellow men, even if you hated them. If only I could console you somehow, I would, but believe me, there is no cure for this pain […]. You live, you feel, and you are lived and felt by others, so you are a happy-unhappy man. I understand you well, for I see through your soul, and… let us embrace, for there is no need to speak further. (Chopin 2009: 406)

The excerpt quoted above is not only a testament to the deep friendship between twenty-year-old Chopin and almost twenty-two-year-old Woyciechowski, but also, as it is claimed by Ryszard Przybylski in his book *Cień jaskółki: Esej o myślach Chopina* [A Shadow of the Swallow: An Essay on Chopin's Thoughts], it reflects the Romantic concept of existence, in which another person becomes one's life (Przybylski 2009: 45).

Indeed, both the excerpt and Chopin's opening address to Woyciechowski "My dearest life!" (Chopin 2009: 402) give full expression to the Romantic feeling. The idea is closely related to Novalis's *Lebensreligion* with its possibly most famous quote "I am You" (Novalis 1997: 173) and its late Romantic travesty by Arthur Rimbaud in yet another letter – one written to Paul Demeny in May 1971: "Je est un autre," [I is another] ([in:] Sorrell 2001: xvii).

This Romantic understanding of human existence stems directly from the contemporary understanding of love and friendship. According to

Przybylski, "the full identification of 'I' with the Other, enabled by love and friendship in the Romantic period, [...] was not limited to the instances where one soul absorbs another. [...] The Other may not only fill [...] one's soul, it may also become one's life" (Przybylski 2009: 45). And not only that: "Romantic friendship was founded on the belief that the existence of 'you' is a presupposed reality" (31). Through the very fact that "you" in the Romantic period – owing to no one else but Novalis[1] – acquired the primary status, "the Romantics managed to transcend the loneliness inscribed in the Cartesian *cogito*" (ibid.).

Escaping the constraints of the tragic loneliness of a thinking subject, so characteristic of the modern period dating from the publication of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*, implies not only the transformation of the famous maxim *cogito ergo sum* into *es ergo sum*, but also the discovery of a new ontology and anthropology. Indeed, in his letter to Woyciechowski, Chopin seems to be uncovering the very secret of existence. In his view, existence is not rooted in the adventures of a single, independently thinking "I," but rather depends on sharing one's life and sentiments with another.

This is reflected in the passage in which the composer uses intransitive Polish verbs "to live" and "to feel" in the passive voice, and where the relationship that emerges through friendship is referred to as a state in which one is "lived" and "felt." Przybylski, who offers an illuminating commentary on this "violation of language" by Chopin (Przybylski 2009: 32), explains this as follows: "You live and you feel, so you are an agent. You are 'lived' and 'felt' by others, which makes you a patient. And you live truly only when you know that you are living for yourself and for another. [...] In that sense, for Chopin existence always implied living for another person" (33). This concept of human existence, fully attained through friendship, offers an escape from the despair that is fundamental to life: "Because you live and feel, you must be unhappy. Existence then entails unhappiness. But through being 'lived' and 'felt' by another, you can escape this dreadful condition. Not simply because you are lived and felt by others, but because you become someone's feeling and life" (34).

Friendship as the passive side of existence – as it is, I believe, portrayed in Chopin's correspondence – was a truly Romantic concept, perfectly reflecting the sensibilities of the period. Still, it was by no means a Romantic invention. In 1580, that is fifty years before Descartes's *Discourse on the*

[1] Novalis borrowed Johann Gottlieb Fichte's concept of the Not-I (*Nicht-Ich*) as the foundation of all philosophy, and in his religion of love he replaced it with "You" (*Du*).

Method was published in Leiden, Michel de Montaigne wrote his famous *Essays*, which influenced Francis Bacon's *Essays* published sixteen years later (1596). These two pre-Cartesian texts deserve to be mentioned here, for two important reasons. Firstly, both Montaigne and Bacon included in their works essays devoted to the subject of friendship; secondly, and more significantly perhaps, these are essays whose logic is governed not by the lonely principle of *cogito*, ready to enthral the European imagination in the following century, but rather the double, and always incomplete when single, existence embraced by the Romantics.

In his essay on friendship, Montaigne describes his own relationship with the writer and philosopher Étienne de la Boétie. Interestingly, his description of that bond is very close to what the great Romantic composer wrote two hundred and fifty years later. Michel de Montaigne distinguishes between two types of friendship, i.e. between the "common" and the "true" kind:

> For the rest, what we ordinarily call friends and friendships are nothing but acquaintanceships and familiarities formed by some chance or convenience, by means of which our souls are bound to each other. In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again. If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I. (de Montaigne 1958: 139)

The seam that Montaigne comments upon, creating a metaphor of friendship in the process – a healing of a wound or sewing together two pieces of skin – is equally strong as the one imagined by the Romantics.

Later in the essay, de Montaigne relates the beginnings of his friendship with de la Boetié: "it is I know not what quintessence of all this mixture, which, having seized my whole will, led it to plunge and lose itself in mine, with equal hunger, equal rivalry. I say lose, in truth, for neither of us reserved anything for himself, nor was anything either his or mine" (ibid.). Then, adding a definition of "true" friendship, the father of essay writing anticipates both Novalis and Rimbaud in stating that: "A single dominant friendship dissolves all other obligations. The secret I have sworn to reveal to no other man, I can impart without perjury to the one who is not another man: he is myself. It is a great enough miracle to be doubled […]" (142).

This miracle of "being doubled" that occurs in the course of true friendship conditions an existence that is built on two entities and focused on

the relation between them instead of being solitary and monadic.[2] The "double state" allows one to fully experience one's existence or, as Chopin declares in his letter, to alleviate its pains, but also, as Francis Bacon suggests, it has real pragmatic value, according to the saying that two heads are better than one. For a friend is more than just another instance of myself, an *alter ego*: "it will appear that it was a sparing speech of the ancients to say, *that a friend is another himself*, for that a friend is far more than himself [...] so that a man hath, as it were, two lives in his desires. A man hath a body, and that body is confined to a place; but where friendship is, all offices of life are, as it were, granted to him and his deputy [...]. How many things are there which a man cannot, with any face or comeliness say or do himself! [...] [B]ut all these things are graceful in a friend's mouth which are blushing in a man's own" (Bacon 2008: 86). A friend appears thus a prosopopoeic character who speaks for me whenever my own mouth is tied, and when he acts, it is as if I were acting through him, because he speaks just like I would myself.

My aim here is to extrapolate these pre-(Renaissance) and post--Cartesian (Romantic) reflections on the nature of friendship to a field which, I believe, must be close both to Chopin as a composer and de Montaigne as a writer (both of them being *hommes de lettres*), and engage in a more pragmatic discussion of the reception of various artistic activities (prose, music, fine arts) in art criticism.

Art Criticism and Friendship: Why Would an Artist Need a Friend?

The Romantic and early modern understanding of friendship, as it emerged from Chopin's letters and Bacon's and Michel de Montaigne's essays, as well as the characteristic concepts of transferability (Chopin), double identity (de Montaigne) and prosopopoeia (Bacon) can well be found among the key elements of the modern and modernist art criticism. This mode of critical

[2] This relational understanding of existence, finding its expression in Michel de Montaigne's and Chopin's visions of friendship, is reminiscent of the definition of identity found in the late writings of Martin Heidegger. According to the German philosopher, even though the common understanding of identity is A = A, and so fixed identity seems to require one entity only, "The formula A = A speaks of equality. It doesn't define A as the same" (Heidegger 2002: 24) and "The formula expresses the equality of A and A. An equation requires at least two elements. One A is equal to another" (23).

writing was described in 1971 by Mieczysław Porębski, one of Poland's leading art historians and critics of the past century and a close friend of Tadeusz Kantor. Porębski believed art criticism founded on friendship to be outdated and disgraced. He labelled it as the "criticism of poets" and described it in the following manner: "In the 19th-century culture, which was a literary culture *par excellance*, the critical choice was usually made based on the printed word [...]. Art criticism usually models itself on literary criticism, which is best grounded in this paradigm. And so, following in the footsteps of philosophers, aestheticists and journalists, poets and writers increasingly often express their opinions" (Porębski 1983: 156). Significantly for the present discussion, these were the poets "who brought the disputes and discussions to boiling temperature through taking the side of artists *who were emotionally and socially close to them* [my emphasis – W.S.] against politicians, moralists and erudites who until recently had held the reins of modernity in that bookish society" (ibid.).

According to Porębski, the roots of this particular mode of art criticism, and the emergence of critics "emotionally close to artists and opposed to politicians" lie in the Romantic period, in the times of Chopin: "tracing the ancestry of this kind of criticism one might go back as far as [...] to the Romantic age" (ibid.).[3] The crucial aspect of this relationship is the kind of a prosopopoeic alliance emerging between a painter and a poet. In Porębski's words, "What is new, unorthodox and nonconformist is often supported by the *poète maudit*, the accursed poet, who sees his natural partner in the accursed painter (*peintre maudit*). He sustains this bond not through his knowledge or expertise but rather through personal things – acts of friendship, free expression of his belief in their path and the game in which they both participate" (ibid.).

This "poets' criticism" – based on friendship, flourishing in literary cafés, French-speaking and modelled on the Parisian society – was, according to Porębski, characteristic of the modernist period and still noticeable throughout the first half of the 20th century. It peaked before the First World War, finding its emblematic expression in Pablo Picasso's relationship with Max Jacob first, and later also André Salmon and Guillaume Apollinaire.

[3] The legendary romantic performance that may be regarded as the beginning of the model of art criticism as described by Porębski is the world premiere of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* in Paris in February 1830 – only a few months before Chopin wrote his letter. The premiere, its surrounding atmosphere of artistic ferment and its critical reception were described by a contemporary author, Théophile Gautier (Gautier 1874: 99–114).

This high point of "poets' criticism" based on friendship is described in detail by Gertrude Stein, who in 1938 wrote in her own essay about her friend Picasso: "His friends in Paris were writers rather than painters; why have painters for friends when he could paint as he could paint. It was obvious that he did not need to have painters in his daily life and this was true all his life" (Stein 1984: 3). Interestingly, she seems to be ascribing to Picasso the type of friendship described by Bacon: the painter befriends a poet who is also a critic, because he may not, cannot, or does not want to speak about his art in a way that a poet/critic may, can, or wants to do it. "Picasso who was a man who only expressed himself in painting had only writers as friends," comments Stein, a writer and a friend of Picasso's herself (4).

For a critic writing from the perspective of 1971, however, criticism founded on friendship seemed already archaic. Porębski believed that

> the poets' criticism [...], through its efficiency, dynamism and also beauty, created norms that were soon adapted by those who lacked the powerful tool of poetic word mastered by their initiators. [...] Currently, however, this kind of criticism, so often repetitive, verbose and devoid of all meaning, becomes not just superfluous, but rather pathetic. Needless to say that today no one would look for [...] information in any writings of such a poet or pseudo-poet. (Porębski 1983: 158)

According to the author, the final decades of the 20th century, and perhaps the following century as well, were to be dominated by a different model, in which criticism would become a domain of experts. This was an entirely different paradigm. While the previous model was dictated by the French culture, the new one was linked with the Anglo-Saxons. The criticism was to move from Parisian cafés to the new capital of arts: New York. But most importantly, friendship as the ground principle of poets' criticism became completely indifferent to the new criticism of experts, founded on impersonal professional relations instead of selfless and affective friendship (158–159).

The abovementioned redefinition and re-evaluation of art criticism occurred in an interesting period. Porębski seems to have had the right intuition concerning the ongoing changes in art criticism. The obvious cultural breakthrough that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s marked a paradigm shift – from modernism and modernity to the postmodern. Perhaps it can be claimed then that as the poets' criticism was essentially modernist, the new criticism advocated by Porębski was matched

to the demands of the postmodern era. This paradigm shift may, I believe, be treated as parallel to the change from the classicist Cartesian model to the Romantic, post-Cartesian one (to which Chopin clearly subscribed), and from the early-modern, Renaissance model to the Cartesian Enlightenment, towards the end of which Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon wrote their texts. Significantly, as I have tried to indicate, these paradigm shifts always entailed changes in the perception of friendship as a category of existence.

I would like to illustrate the shift from poets' to experts' critical model using the example of Eva Hesse – an artist who died in 1970, a year before Porębski's text was published. Hesse was an essential figure for the transition in art that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which – to put it briefly – meant not only surpassing the modernist paradigm by postmodernism in art theory and practice but also the shift from modern to contemporary art, that is still valid today. The example of Eva Hesse shows also, I believe, the present tendency to turn away from the expert formula and look back – again – to the former model of friendship which characterised poets' criticism.

Eva Hesse's Friends

Eva Hesse's *Diaries*, published in their complete form only in 2016, almost half a century after her death, offer – as diaries usually do – great insight into their author's psyche. As far as Hesse's friendships are concerned, an attentive reader will soon notice that if the artist ever had a true friend in her life, it was Eva Hesse herself. This stems from Hesse's much-commented-upon tendency to write about herself in the third person (McKinnon 2010: 27–40), as if Eva Hesse was distancing herself from the "true" Eva and Eva the artist. That is why I propose to refer to Eva-the-diarist as the "writing Eva." According to the *Diaries*, as the writing Eva recorded in 1966, Eva had also another friend, someone called Rosie: "my friendship with Rosie. Our closeness + understanding of each other is remarkable and exists now since 1954" (Hesse 2016: 625). Still, she often felt painfully alone. In 1964 she wrote in capital letters, as if crying out loud: "Sat. eve. Constant minor shocks upon arrival home. LONELINESS!" (294).

I did not read *Diaries*, however, to investigate Hesse's "common" friendships, to use Michel de Montaigne's term. My intention was to discover what the writing Eva has to say about the "true" friendship, as the author of *Essays* put it, namely her relationship with the art critic and

curator Lucy R. Lippard who discussed Hesse's works from the perspective of their bond.

Lippard was one of the few influential figures of the American artistic world in the 1960s and 1970s who instantly recognised Hesse's greatness. She was also the first to offer an in-depth analysis of Hesse's art. Her book entitled *Eva Hesse* was published in 1976, six years after Hesse's untimely death, and from today's perspective it remains the fundamental critical work marking the early reception of the artist's output. Even though *Diaries*, penned by the "writing Eva" and concentrated on the "true Eva" and "Eva the artist," do not offer much information regarding the relationship of the two women,[4] there can be no doubt that the perspective of female (!) friendship was essential to Lucy Lippard. Nevertheless, this frame of reference was immediately rejected by other specialists in the field, confirming Porębski's intuition about the end of the paradigm of friendship in art criticism (formulated five years before Lippard's book).

Lucy Lippard expressed this allegedly outdated perspective, which she still wanted to adopt, up front, but also exposed its main weakness:

> I did not then, nor will I in this book, hesitate to "read into" Hesse's work my knowledge of Hesse herself. She was a close friend for many years, and it would be a futile exercise, as well as something of a rejection, to attempt to ignore that knowledge. At the same time, it is clear that others, friends as well as those who know only the work, whose subjective reactions to Hesse differ from mine, will disagree. [...] To make this book personal at all was a difficult decision; since her death Hesse's memory has been exploited even by those writers who purported to seriously discussing her art. In view of this, I began with a hyper-awareness that the only way to write about Hesse was to tread a fine and dangerous line between the art and the life – to emulate, in other words, the 'edge' she spoke of walking herself. (Lippard 1976a: 6)

This ambivalent perspective, full of traps and potential quagmires, is characteristic of Lippard's narrative. Although the author recognises its flaws, she also clearly perceives it as valuable and precious – this is especially well visible in the passage in which she comments on writings by

[4] Unfortunately, Hesse's *Diaries* edited by Barry Rosen with the assistance of Tamara Bloomberg were published without any introduction, critical commentary or footnotes that would help to unambiguously identify a number of individuals that Hesse refers to (by means of their first names only) in her life narrative. A critical edition of Hesse's writing is yet to come.

other critics, who do not know the artist personally and rely solely on published testimonies. As a result, the friendly tone of Lippard's critical assessment, though questionable to a certain extent, becomes founded on a kind of a sisterly bond between the deceased artist and the living and writing critic. Significantly, this personal, friendly and feminist perspective was something that Lippard had adapted before, as it allowed her to construe alternative narratives of the 1960s and 1970s art and interpret that period outside of the dominant critical discourse. For these narratives, Eva Hesse remained an important reference.

Suffice it to mention eccentric abstraction – a term crucial today, but virtually nonexistent in the critical discourse of the final three decades of the 20th century. Lippard used this phrase as the title of an exhibition she curated in 1966, in which Eva Hesse participated. The exhibition and its title were meant as a counterpoint to other, institutionalised forms of creating artistic canons; it was especially aimed against minimalism and its manifestation in the form of the famous 1966 exhibition titled *Primary Structures* in the Jewish Museum in New York (Szymański 2015: 50–51). Another thing that comes to mind is the concept of dematerialisation, introduced by Lippard and John Chandler in 1968 as an alternative to conceptualism. Finally, I would like to mention Lippard's book titled *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (Lippard 1976b), published in the same year as her monograph on Eva Hesse. The volume, written from an openly feminist perspective, was a collection of essays devoted to female artists (including, of course, Eva Hesse). As the title suggests, even though Lippard's reflections are grounded in the concept of eccentric abstraction, she clearly relies on an extended understanding of friendship, now replaced by the idea of sisterhood.

Lippard's case renders at least two important moments that may shed light on the changing role of friendship in art criticism. First of all, the shift is visible in the eradication of concepts introduced by Lippard as well as the rejection of the friendly/sisterly perspective that she adopted in discussing American art of the period. Secondly, we may trace these concepts' afterlives and witness their renaissance that has occurred in the late 20th century, before our own eyes.

The initial discursive eradication of Lippard's ideas, that took place in the 1970s, seems to be indeed related to Porębski's 1971 diagnosis that the friendship mode of poets' criticism was replaced by the new, impersonal expert mode. In 1976, Rosalind E. Krauss and Annette Michelson launched the influential magazine *October*, which was to imprint its mark on art history and criticism in the following decades. The critics grouped

around the magazine, who just like Lippard commented on the American art of the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Hal Foster or Krauss herself, held a very different view not only on how the ongoing artistic processes should be interpreted but also on what artistic discourse should look like. Their analyses, founded on French theory and poststructuralist thinking, were completely free from the personal tone adopted by Lippard and leaned heavily towards what Porębski described as the "expert mode."[5] In addition to that, systematically (Krauss 1973: 45–53) or not, they contributed to the rejection of Lippard's proposed labels rooted in the paradigm of friendship (Szymański 2015: 35–58); instead, even if this may appear absurd in the light of the postmodern theory to which they subscribed, they seemed to gravitate towards the lonely perspective of Cartesian *cogito*.

Although there can be no doubt that diagnoses offered by Krauss or Foster have become canonical and it is hard to envisage contemporary art history and criticism without them, the last couple of years indicate, I believe, a gradual departure from the "expert mode" championed by the *October* circles. This tendency coincides with the rekindled interest in Lippard's legacy and increased critical attention offered to the work of Eva Hesse (expressed, among others, by the recent publication of her *Diaries*). The return to Lippard's concepts is clearly visible in recent studies of her work (Butler 2012) and exhibitions focused on reinterpreting Lippard's historical exhibitions and texts.[6] It can also be traced in various critical and artistic enterprises aimed at reinterpreting the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s, heavily drawing on the once-rejected perspective of friendship and poets' criticism. The 2014 exhibition entitled *Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt* and organised by the Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas, together with its accompanying catalogue, is a case in point. It was fully devoted to uncovering the relationship between two artists, who happened to be also close friends. Both of them were also

[5] One should not ignore the fact that Rosalind Krauss was the student of Clement Greenberg – the critic who preached a formalist approach to art criticism and spoke against Harold Rosenberg, his major adversary, who, in turn, supported a subjective, auto/biographical and existential mode of writing. Krauss's contempt for the criticism of poets, which was still popular in the 1960s USA as testified to by, for example, the work of Frank O'Hara, might be seen as a clear manifestation of Greenberg's influence onto her critical practice.

[6] Such as the exhibition entitled *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art* organised by the Brooklyn Museum in 2012/2013, and accompanied by a book by the same title (Morris and Bonin 2012).

among the closest friends of Lucy Lippard, whose personal text was featured in the catalogue.

Perhaps there is no point in announcing the end of a paradigm in art criticism which Porębski labelled as "expert mode" and replacing it with a new one, as paradigm shifts and turns in the humanities pronounced on an all but daily basis too often prove short-lived. What is significant, however, and certainly proven true by the reception of Eva Hesse's art and Lucy Lippard's critical work, is that today's interest in biography and affect studies facilitates the return of art criticism filtered through the perspective of friendship. And the old motto on friendship and truth by Friedrich Schiller, which once anticipated the Romanticism, can no longer be treated as sentimental debris: "Wahrheit suchen wir beide" (Schiller [in:] Prokopiuk and Siemek 1974: 5).

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